

CATCHING THEM YOUNG

THE first year or so of Masonic life are to the members of our Fraternity very much what the years of childhood are to the adult. In them those conceptions and impressions are received, those habits formed, which dominate later life. The young Mason is in a receptive state, he craves for explanation and instruction. If he does not receive it, he is apt to gain an unworthy, or at least an impoverished idea of Masonry, which generally prevents his ever making any real advance.

Therefore, the question of arousing the interest of the newly initiated brother is of paramount importance. What we have to do is to encourage the newly-made Mason to follow the injunction given to him, to "approach the East." Here of course is meant, not the point of the compass, not the East of the lodge room, but the symbolic East, the source of light and knowledge. It is impossible for any one to actually attain this destination; it is an ideal that recedes as we advance, but in receding grows in magnitude and significance. Though we can never reach the goal yet each can make the effort to approach it, and to advance along the path. Some will go farther than others; some will fall by the way before they are well started; others progress to the frontiers of recognized knowledge; and a few, very few, will overstep the bounds of what has been accomplished and find themselves pioneering in fields never before touched by the labors of any predecessor. There are other factors into which the way of attainment can be analysed, but they need not be considered here. It is aside from our purpose in the present discussion to indicate how to encourage progress after the start has been made, for example. It is the start and the material with which to begin that we are essentially interested now.

A survey of the present situation does not seem to help us much in finding a remedy except insofar as it gives the key to the weaknesses which must be eliminated. There are in this country more than three millions of men who wear the square and compass. Of these three million possibly three per cent know any more about Masonry than was told them on the nights they received their degrees. Thus we are faced with a staggering problem. The overwhelming majority of American Masons know no more than the bare ritualistic elements of Masonry and most of them only the merest confused smattering of that. These Masons form the various categories of "button Masons." Some of them attend lodge at irregular intervals, others on anniversaries, when elections are held, others whenever refreshments are served, and still worse some never come at all. It is necessary to see no farther, here is the great weakness, to strengthen which must be the first object of any constructive work. There are before us then, two evils, one existing in the present state of the Fraternity, and one which threatens the future. Where is the best point at which to begin work ?

If strenuous efforts are made on those members who are at present uninterested observers of the workings of the Craft and we neglect those who are coming up the ladder of initiation, a constant supply of uninterested members is being created and our work is endless. It might be stated with certainty that concentrating on the other horn of the dilemma leaves the already dying timber to the final ravages of dry rot and decay. It is for both the old and the young Mason that we have to work, but strategically the latter is far more important for the future.

These objects, however, need a two fold treatment. The two classes cannot be reached by quite the same methods, although in the final analysis the same principles and the same material must be employed. The educational efforts of various Grand Lodges, the mechanism of Study Clubs fostered by

the N.M.R.S. are directed very largely towards the greater and senior class of Masons, and it is only by such means that they can be reached. But the task is difficult. The subject of the effort has been initiated perhaps several years previously, and the enthusiasm of the early period has died out, and must be revived. This phase of Study Club work will require the hardest effort and will prove the least fruitful. The other phase of Study Club work comes in bringing the new initiate into the fold of thinking Masons. There is a preliminary step to this work and it is being worked with considerable success in many cases. We refer to the presenting of pamphlets, magazines, or books to the newly initiated Mason as he climbs the three steps. The value of this lies chiefly in the fact that it shows the young Mason that there is more than a mere ritualistic formula to the Order, and while his enthusiasm is still at its highest, encourages him to make a start in "approaching the East." He is ripe to fall in with the Study Club idea and capitalize the knowledge he has acquired from the elementary works that have been given him.

Thus far we have seen a possible remedy to a bad situation. We probably never will see the day when Masonry is composed of reading or at least thinking members, even to the extent of one in three, but a reasonable goal at this time would be one in ten, and that might, and ought to be accomplished before very many years are past. While it is devoutly to be hoped for, it is doubtless beyond our wildest dreams that each of these 300,000 future readers on Masonic subjects will become students in the scholastic sense of the word. If we got only 3,000 research workers out of that number we are increasing the present member by about 2,700, and that might be judged as beyond the wildest hope. It is not research students that Masonry wants, however. They will develop if this idea can be worked out. It is interested members that are needed; men who are capable of intelligently performing the official duties of the lodge, men who when they take part in a ceremonial understand whereof they speak, and do not merely repeat a meaningless formula memorized after the fashion of a parrot, or ground out mechanically like a gramophone, with less effect or conviction than the bird of green and iridescent plumage says, "folly wants a cracker."

The scheme is attractive and looks well on paper, but unfortunately there are difficulties and stumbling blocks in the way. One, and the most important, because it seems harder to remedy than the others, is the dearth of reliable popular Masonic reading. There is no scarcity of books, and even of popular works which the unstudious may read for pure enjoyment, much as he would read one of the six best sellers, and having, unfortunately, just as much foundation in fact. It is a dearth of reliable material that we are confronted with. There is much valuable information that is authentic, but so written that it is of interest only to the more advanced student. There are no more than half a dozen - a dozen at most - of good, authoritative yet elementary books suitable for the beginner in Masonic reading. Doubtless every field of knowledge has been obscured with wild theories and the baseless fancies of writers with more imagination than knowledge, but none to the extent that Masonic scholarship has been. There are more hobby-riders, more constructors of systems on the basis of scraps of disparate facts, among so-called Masonic scholars than in any other subject of research. While of those who sincerely try to weigh all evidence and confirm every step taken are conspicuous by their rarity.

It is this state of affairs that makes the task of educating Masons so difficult. Misunderstandings arise and corrections have to be made and the earnest seeker after truth, who has not sufficient time to read

everything of importance that has been written and weigh it for himself, becomes disgusted and joins the army of uninterested Masons.

As long as the type of scholarship remains what it is the task of overcoming the lack of interest in Masons is going to be difficult. It means hard work and unceasing effort and the best possible use must be made of the material in hand. There are two aims that must be fostered, first, to increase the interest of new members and in those old initiates who can be reached, and second, to increase the number and the quality of authentic yet popular works on Masonry. When these tasks are accomplished Masonry will rise to heights yet hardly dreamed of, and may possibly begin to justify some of the extravagant claims made for it by our panegyrical writers and **lodge orators**.

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